



The Lost Kafoozalum

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I remember some bad times, most of them back home on Excenus 23; the worst was when Dad fell under the reaping machine but there was also the one when I got lost twenty miles from home with a dud radio, at the age of twelve; and the one when Uncle Charlie caught me practicing emergency turns in a helicar round the main weather-maker; and the one on Figuerra being chased by a cyber-crane; and the time when Dad decided to send me to Earth to do my Education.

This time is bad in a different way, with no sharp edges but a kind of a desolation.

Most people I know are feeling bad just now, because at Russett College we finished our Final Examination five days ago and Results are not due for a two weeks.

My friend B Laydon says this is yet another Test anyone still sane at the end being proved tough enough to break a molar on; she says also The worst part is in bed remembering all the things she could have written and did not; The second worst is also in bed picturing how to explain to her parents when they get back to Earth that *someone* has to come bottom and in a group as brilliant as Russett College Cultural Engineering Class this is really no disgrace.

I am not worried that way so much, I cannot remember what I wrote anyway and I can think of one or two people I am pretty sure will come bottomer than me—or B either.

I would prefer to think it is just Finals cause me to feel miserable but it is not.

In Psychology they taught us The mind has the faculty of concealing any motive it is ashamed of, especially from itself; seems unfortunately mine does not have this gadget supplied.

I never wanted to come to Earth. I was sent to Russett against my will and counting the days till I could get back to Home, Father and Excensus 23, but the sad truth is that now the longed-for moment is nearly on top of me I do not want to go.

Dad's farm was a fine place to grow up, but now I had four years on Earth the thought of going back there makes me feel like a three-weeks' chicken got to get back in its shell.

B and I are on an island in the Pacific. Her parents are on Caratacus researching on local art forms, so she and I came here to be miserable in company and away from the rest.

It took me years on Earth to get used to all this water around, it seemed unnatural and dangerous to have it all lying loose that way, but now I shall miss even the Sea.

The reason we have this long suspense over Finals is that they will not use Reading Machines to mark the papers for fear of cutting down critical judgement; so each paper has to be read word by word by three Examiners and there are forty-three of us and we wrote six papers each.

What I think is I am sorry for the Examiners, but B says they were the ones who set the papers and it serves them perfectly right.

I express surprise because D. J. M'Clare our Professor is one of them, but B says He is one of the greatest men in the galaxy, of course, but she gave up thinking him perfect *years* ago.

One of the main attractions on this Island is swimming under water, especially by moonlight. Dad sent me a fish-boat as a birthday present two years back, but I never used it yet on account of my above-mentioned attitude to water. Now I got this feeling of Carpe Diem, make the most of Earth while I am on it because probably I shall not pass this way again.

The fourth day on the Island it is full moon at ten o'clock, so I pluck up courage to wriggle into the boat and go out under the Sea. B says Fish parading in and out of reefs just remind her of Cultural Engineering—crowd behavior—so she prefers to turn in early and find out what nightmares her subconscious will throw up *this* time.

The reefs by moonlight are everything they are supposed to be, why did I not do this often when I had the chance? I stay till my oxygen is nearly gone, then come out and sadly press the button that collapses the boat into a thirty-pound package of plastic hoops and oxygen cans. I sling it on my back and head for the chalet B and I hired among the coconut trees.

I am crossing an open space maybe fifty yards from it when a Thing drops on me out of the air.

I do not see the Thing because part of it covers my face, and the

rest is grabbed round my arms and my waist and my hips and whatever, I cannot see and I cannot scream and I cannot find anything to kick. The Thing is strong and rubbery and many-armed and warmish, and less than a second after I first feel it I am being hauled up into the air.

I do not care for this at all.

I am at least fifty feet up before it occurs to me to bite the hand that gags me and then I discover it is plastic, not alive at all. Then I feel self and encumberance scraping through some kind of aperture; there is a sharp click as of a door closing and the Thing goes limp all round me.

I spit out the bit I am biting and it drops away so that I can see.

Well!

I am in a kind of a cup-shaped space maybe ten feet across but not higher than I am; there is a trap door in the ceiling; the Thing is lying all around me in a mess of plastic arms, with an extensible stalk connecting it to the wall. I kick free and it turns over exposing the label FRAGILE CARGO right across the back.

The next thing I notice is two holdalls, B's and mine, clamped against the wall, and the next after that is the opening of a trap door in the ceiling and B's head silhouetted in it remarking Oh there you are Liz.

I confirm this statement and ask for explanations.

B says She doesn't understand all of it but it is all right.

It is not all right I reply, if she has joined some Society such as for the Realization of Fictitious Improbabilities that is her privilege but no reason to involve me.

B says Why do I not stop talking and come up and see for myself?

There is a slight hitch when I jam in the trap door, then B helps me get the boat off my back and I drop it on the Fragile Cargo and emerge into the cabin of a Hopper, drop-shaped, cargo-carrying; I have been in its hold till now.

There are one or two peculiar points about it, or maybe one or two hundred, such as the rate at which we are ascending which seems to be bringing us right into the Stratosphere; but the main thing I notice is the pilot. He has his back to us but is recognizably Ram Gopal who graduated in Cultural Engineering last year, Rumor

says next to top of his class.

I ask him what kind of a melodramatic shenanigan is this?

B says We had to leave quietly in a hurry without attracting attention so she booked us out at the Hotel *hours* ago and she and Ram have been hanging around waiting for me ever since.

I point out that the scope-trace of an Unidentified Flying Object will occasion a lot more remark than a normal departure even at midnight.

At this Ram smiles in an inscrutable Oriental manner and B gets nearly as cross as I do, seems she has mentioned this point before.

We have not gone into it properly when the cabin suddenly shifts through a right angle. B and I go sliding down the vertical floor and end sitting on a window. There is a jolt and a shudder and Ram mutters things in Hindi and then suddenly Up is nowhere at all.

B and I scramble off the window and grab fixtures so as to stay put. The stars have gone and we can see nothing except the dim glow over the instruments; then suddenly lights go on outside.

We look out into the hold of a ship.

Our ten-foot teardrop is sitting next to another one, like two eggs in a rack. On the other side is a bulkhead; behind, the curve of the hull; and directly ahead an empty space, then another bulkhead and an open door, through which after a few seconds a head pokes cautiously.

The head is then followed by a body which kicks off against the wall and sails slowly towards us. Ram presses a stud and a door slides open in the hopper; but the new arrival stops himself with a hand on either side of the frame, his legs trailing any old how behind him. It is Peter Yeng Sen who graduated the year I did my Field Work.

He says, Gopal, dear fellow, there was no need for the knocking, we heard the bell all right.

Ram grumbles something about the guide beam being miss-set, and slides out of his chair. Peter announces that we have only just made it as the deadline is in seven minutes time; he waves B and me out of the hopper, through the door and into a corridor where a certain irregular vibration is coming from the walls.

Ram asks what is that tapping? And Peter sighs and says The

present generation of students has no discipline at all.

At this B brakes with one hand against the wall and cocks her head to listen; next moment she laughs and starts banging with her fist on the wall.

Peter exclaims in Mandarin and tows her away by one wrist like a reluctant kite. The rapping starts again on the far side of the wall and I suddenly recognize a primitive signaling system called Regret or something, I guess because it was used by people in situations they did not like such as Sinking ships or solitary confinement; it is done by tapping water pipes and such.

Someone found it in a book and the more childish element in College learned it up for signaling during compulsory lectures. Interest waning abruptly when the lecturers started to learn it, too.

I never paid much attention not expecting to be in Solitary confinement much; this just shows you; next moment Ram opens a door and pushes me through it, the door clicks behind me and Solitary confinement is what I am in.

I remember this code is really called Remorse which is what I feel for not learning when I had the chance.

However I do not have long for it, a speaker in the wall requests everyone to lie down as acceleration is about to begin. I strap down on the couch which fills half the compartment, countdown begins and at zero the floor is suddenly *down* once more.

I wait till my stomach settles, then rise to explore.

I am in an oblong room about eight by twelve, it looks as though it had been hastily partitioned off from a larger space. The walls are prefab plastic sheet, the rest is standard fittings slung in and bolted down with the fastenings showing.

How many of my classmates are on this ship? *Remorse* again as tapping starts on either side of me.

Discarding such Hypotheses as that Ram and Peter are going to hold us to ransom—which might work for me, since my Dad somehow got to be a millionaire, but not for B because her parents think money is vulgar—or that we are being carried off to found an ideal Colony somewhere—any first-year student can tell you why that won't work—only one idea seems plausible.

This is that Finals were not final and we are in for a Test of some sort.

After ten minutes I get some evidence; a Reading Machine is trundled in, the door immediately slamming shut so I do not see who trundles it.

I prowl round it looking for tricks but it seems standard; I take a seat in it, put on the headset and turn the switch.

Hypothesis confirmed, I suppose.

There is a reel in place and it contains background information on a problem in Cultural Engineering all set out the way we are taught to do it in Class. The Problem concerns developments on a planet got settled by two groups during the Exodus and been isolated ever since.

Well while a Reading Machine is running there is no time to think, it crams in data at full speed and evaluation has to wait. However my subconscious goes into action and when the reel stops it produces a Suspicion full grown.

The thing is too tidy.

When we were First Year we dreamed up situations like this and argued like mad over them, but they were a lot too neat for real life and too dramatic as well.

However one thing M'Clare said to us, and every other lecturer too, just before the Finals, was Do not spend time trying to figure what the examiner was after but answer the question as set; I am more than halfway decided this is some mysterious Oriental idea of a joke but I get busy thinking in case it is not.

The Problem goes like this:

The planet is called Incognita in the reel and it is right on the edge of the known volume of space, it got settled by two groups somewhere between three and three and a half centuries ago. The rest of the human race never heard of it till maybe three years back.

(Well it happens that way, inhabited planets are still turning up eight or ten a century, on account of during the Exodus some folk were willing to travel a year or more so as to get away from the rest).

The ship that spotted the planet as inhabited did not land, but

reported to Central Government, Earth, who shipped observers out to take a look.

(There was a rumor circulating at Russett that the Terry Government might employ some of us on that kind of job, but it never got official. I do not know whether to believe this bit or not.)

It is stated the observers landed secretly and mingled with the natives unobserved.

(This is not physically impossible but sounds too like a Field Trip to be true.)

The observers are not named but stated to be graduates of the Cultural Engineering Class.

They put in a few months' work and sent home unanimous Crash Priority reports the situation is *bad*, getting worse and the prognosis is War.

Brother.

I know people had wars, I know one reason we do not have them now is just that with so many planets and cheap transportation, pressure has other outlets; these people scrapped their ships for factories and never built more.

But.

There are only about ten million of them and surely to goodness a whole planet gives room enough to keep out of each other's hair?

Well this is not Reasoning but a Reaction, I go back to the data for another look.

The root trouble is stated to be that two groups landed on the planet without knowing the others were there, when they met thirty years later they got a disagreeable shock.

I cannot see there was any basic difference between them, they were very similar, especially in that neither lot wanted anything to do with people they had not picked themselves.

So they divided the planet along a Great Circle which left two of the main land-masses in one hemisphere and two in another.

They agree each to keep to its own section and leave the other alone.

Twenty years later, trading like mad; each has certain minerals the other lacks; each has certain agricultural products the other

finds it difficult to grow.

You think this leads to Co-operation Friendship and ultimate Federation?

I will not go into the incidents that make each side feel it is being gypped, it is enough that from time to time each has a scarcity or hold-up on deliveries that upsets the other's economy; and they start experimenting to become self-sufficient: and the exporter's economy is upset in turn. And each thinks the other did it on purpose.

This sort of situation reacts internally leading to Politics.

There are troubles about a medium-sized island on the dividing line, and the profits from interhemispherical transport, and the laws of interhemispherical trade.

It takes maybe two hundred years, but finally each has expanded the Police into an army with a whole spectrum of weapons not to be used on any account except for Defense.

This situation lasts seventy years getting worse all the time, now Rumors have started on each side that the other is developing an Ultimate Weapon, and the political parties not in power are agitating to move first before the thing is complete.

The observers report War not maybe this year or the next but within ten, and if neither side was looking for an Ultimate Weapon to begin with they certainly are now.

Taking all this at face value there seems an obvious solution.

I am thinking this over in an academic sort of way when an itchy trickle of sweat starts down my vertebrae.

Who is going to apply this solution? Because if this is anything but another Test, or the output of a diseased sense of humor, I would be sorry for somebody.

I dial black coffee on the wall servitor and wish B were here so we could prove to each other the thing is just an exercise; I do not do so well at spotting proofs on my own.

Most of our class exercises have concerned something that happened, once.

After about ninety minutes the speaker requests me to write not

more than one thousand words on any scheme to improve the situation and the equipment required for it.

I spent ten minutes verbalizing the basic idea and an hour or so on "equipment"; the longer I go on the more unlikely it all seems. In the end I have maybe two hundred words which acting on instructions I post through a slit in the door.

Five minutes later I realize I have forgotten the Time Factor.

If the original ship took a year to reach Incognita, it will take at least four months now; therefore it is more than four months since that report was written and will be more than a year before anyone arrives and War may have started already.

I sit back and by transition of ideas start to wonder where this ship is heading? We are still at one gee and even on Mass-Time you cannot juggle apparent acceleration and spatial transition outside certain limits; we are not just orbiting but must be well outside the Solar System by now.

The speaker announces Everyone will now get some rest; I smell sleep-gas for one moment and have just time to lie down.

I guess I was tired, at that.

When I wake I feel more cheerful than I have for weeks; analysis indicates I am glad something is *happening* even if it is another Exam.

I dial breakfast but am too restless to eat; I wonder how long this goes on or whether I am supposed to show Initiative and break out; I am examining things with this in mind when the speaker comes to life again.

It says, "Ladies and gentlemen. You have not been told whether the problem that you studied yesterday concerned a real situation or an imaginary one. You have all outlined measures which you think would improve the situation described. Please consider, seriously, whether you would be prepared to take part yourself in the application of your plan."

Brother.

There is no way to tell whether those who say No will be counted cowardly or those who say Yes rash idiots or what, the owner of that voice has his inflections too well trained to give anything away except intentionally.

D. J. M'Clare.

Not in person but a recording, anyway M'Clare is on Earth surrounded by exam papers.

I sit back and try to think, honestly, if that crack-brained notion I wrote out last night were going to be tried in dead earnest, would I take a hand in it?

The trouble is, hearing M'Clare's voice has convinced me it is a Test, I don't know whether it is testing my courage or my prudence in fact I might as well toss for it.

Heads I am crazy, Tails a defaulter; Tails is what it is.

I seize my styler and write the decision down.

There is the slit in the door.

I twiddle the note and think Well nobody asked for it yet.

Suppose it is real, after all?

I remember the itchy, sweaty feeling I got yesterday and try to picture really embarking on a thing like this, but I cannot work up any lather today.

I begin to picture M'Clare reading my decision not to back up my own idea.

I pick up the coin and juggle it around.

The speaker remarks When I am quite ready will I please make a note of my decision and post it through the door.

I go on flipping the coin up and presently it drops on the floor, it is Heads this time.

Tossing coins is a pretty feeble way to decide.

I drop the note on the floor and take another sheet and write "YES. Lysistrata Lee."

Using that name seems to make it more legal.

I slip the paper in the slit and poke till it falls through on the other side of the door.

I am suddenly immensely hungry and dial breakfast all over again.

Just as I finish M'Clare's voice starts once more.

"It's always the minor matters that cause the most difficulty. The

timing of this announcement has cost me as much thought as any aspect of the arrangements. The trouble is that however honest you are—and your honesty has been tested repeatedly—and however strong your imagination—about half of your training has been devoted to developing it—you can't possibly be sure, answering a hypothetical question, that you are giving the answer you would choose if you knew it was asked in dead earnest.

"Those of you who answered the question in the negative are out of this. They have been told that it was a test, of an experimental nature, and have been asked to keep the whole thing a secret. They will be returning to Earth in a few hours' time. I ask the rest of you to think it over once again. Your decision is still private. Only the two people who gathered you together know which members of the class are in this ship. The list of possible helpers was compiled by a computer. I haven't seen it myself.

"You have a further half hour in which to make up your minds finally. Please remember that if you have any private reservations on the matter, or if you are secretly afraid, you may endanger us all. You all know enough psychology to realize this.

"If you still decide in favor of the project, write your name on a slip of paper and post it as before. If you are not absolutely certain about it, do nothing. Please think it over for half an hour."

Me, I had enough thinking. I write my name—just L. Lee—and post it straight away.

However I cannot stop thinking altogether. I guess I think very hard, in fact. My Subconscious insists afterwards that it did register the plop as something came through the slit, but my Conscious failed to notice it at all.

Hours later—my watch says twenty-five minutes but I guess the Mass-Time has affected it—anyway I had three times too much solitary confinement—when will they let me out of here?—there is a knock at the door and a second later it slides apart.

I am expecting Ram or Peter so it takes me an appreciable fraction of a moment to realize I am seeing D. J. M'Clare.

Then I remember he is back on Earth buried in Exam papers and conclude I am having a hallucination.

This figment of my imagination says politely, "Do you mind if I sit down?"

He collapses on the couch as though thoroughly glad of it.

It is a strange thing, every time I see M'Clare I am startled all over again at how good-looking he is; seems I forget it between times which is maybe why I never fell for him as most female students do.

However what strikes me this time is that he looks tired, three-days-sleepless tired with worries on top.

I guess he is real, at that.

He says, "Don't look so accusing, Lizzie, I only just got on this ship myself."

This does not make sense; you cannot just arrive on a ship twenty-four hours after it goes on Mass-Time; or can you?

M'Clare leans back and closes his eyes and inquires whether I am one of the Morse enthusiasts?

So that is the name; I say when we get back I will learn it first thing.

"Well," says he, "I did my best to arrange privacy for all of you; with so many ingenious idiots on board I'm not really surprised that they managed to circumvent me. I had to cheat and check that you really were on the list; and I knew that whoever backed out you'd still be on board."

So I should hope he might: Horrors there is my first answer screwed up on the floor and Writing side top-most.

However he has not noticed it, he goes on "Anyway you of all people won't be thought to have dropped out because you were afraid."

I have just managed to hook my heel over the note and get it out of sight, M'Clare has paused for an answer and I have to dredge my Sub-threshold memories for—

WHAT?

M'Clare opens his eyes and says like I am enacting Last Straw, "Have some sense, Lizzie." Then in a different tone, "Ram says he gave you the letter half an hour ago."

What letter?

My brain suddenly registers a small pale patch been occupying a corner of my retina for the last half hour; it turns out to be a letter

postmarked Excenus 23.

I disembowel it with one jerk. It is from my Dad and runs like this:

> My dear Liz,
>
> Thank you for your last letter, glad you are keeping fit and so am I.
>
> I just got a letter from your College saying you will get a degree conferred on you on September 12th and parents if on Earth will be welcome.
>
> Well Liz this I got to see and Charlie says the same, but the letter says too Terran Authority will not give a permit to visit Earth just for this, so I wangled on to a Delegation which is coming to discuss trade with the Department of Commerce. Charlie and I will be arriving on Earth on August 24th.
>
> Liz it is good to think I shall be seeing you again after four years. There are some things about your future I meant to write to Professor M'Clare about, but now I shall be able to talk it over direct. Please give him my regards.
>
> Be seeing you Lizzie girl, your affectionate Dad
>
> J. X. Lee.

Dear old Dad, after all these years farming with a weather-maker on a drydust planet I want to see his face the first time he sees real rain.

Hell's fires and shades of darkness, I shan't be there!

M'Clare says, "Your father wrote to me saying that he will be arriving on Earth on 24th August. I take it your letter says the same. I came on a dispatch boat; you can go back on it."

Now what is he talking about? Then I get the drift.

I say, "Look. So Dad will be on Earth before we get back. What difference does that make?"

"You can't let him arrive and find you missing."

Well I admit to a qualm at the thought of Dad let loose on Earth

without me, but after all Uncle Charlie is a born Terrie and can keep him in line; Hell he is old enough to look after himself anyway.

"You met my Dad," I point out. "You think J. X. Lee would want any daughter of his backing out on a job so as to hold his hand? I can send him a letter saying I am off on a job or a Test or whatever I please and hold everything till I get back; what are you doing about people's families on Earth already?"

M'Clare says we were all selected as having families not on Earth at present, and I must go back.

I say like Hell I will.

He says he is my official guardian and responsible for me.

I say he is just as responsible for everyone else on this ship.

I spent years and years trying to think up a remark would really get home to M'Clare; well I have done it now.

I say, "Look. You are tired and worried and maybe not thinking so well just now.

"I know this is a very risky job, don't think I missed that at all. I tried hard to imagine it like you said over the speaker. I cannot quite imagine dying but I know how Dad will feel if I do.

"I did my level best to scare myself sick, then I decided it is just plain worth the risk anyway.

"To work out a thing like this you have to have a kind of arithmetic, you add in everybody's feelings with the other factors, then if you get a plus answer you forget everything else and go right ahead.

"I am not going to think about it any more, because I added up the sum and got the answer and upsetting my nerves won't help. I guess you worked out the sum, too. You decided four million people were worth risking twenty, even if they do have parents. Even if they are your students. So they are, too, and you gave us all a chance to say No.

"Well nothing has altered that, only now the values look different to you because you are tired and worried and probably missed breakfast, too."

Brother some speech, I wonder what got into me? M'Clare is wondering, too, or maybe gone to sleep sitting, it is some time

before he answers me.

"Miss Lee, you are deplorably right on one thing at least. I don't know whether I was fit to make such a decision when I made it, but I'm not fit now. As far as you personally are concerned… ." He trails off looking tireder than ever, then picks up again suddenly. "You are again quite right, I am every bit as responsible for the other people on board as I am for you."

He climbs slowly to his feet and walks out without another word.

The door is left open and I take this as an invitation to freedom and shoot through in case it was a mistake.

No because Ram is opening doors all along the corridor and ten of Russett's brightest come pouring out like mercury finding its own level and coalesce in the middle of the floor.

The effect of release is such that after four minutes Peter Yeng Sen's head appears at the top of a stairway and he says the crew is lifting the deck plates, will we for Time's sake go along to the Conference Room which is soundproof.

The Conference Room is on the next deck and like our cabins shows signs of hasty construction; the soundproofing is there but the acoustics are kind of muffled and the generator is not boxed in but has cables trailing all over, and the fastenings have a strong but temporary look.

Otherwise there is a big table and a lot of chairs and a small projection box in front of each with a note-taker beside.

It is maybe this very functional setup or maybe the dead flatness of our voices in the damped room, but we do not have so much to talk about any more. We automatically take places at the table, all at one end, leaving seven vacant chairs near the door.

Looking round, I wonder what principle we were selected on.

Of my special friends Eru Te Whangoa and Kirsty Lammergaw are present but Lily Chen and Likofo Komom'baratse and Jean LeBrun are not; we have Cray Patterson who is one of my special enemies but not Blazer Weigh or the Astral Cad; the rest are P. Zapotec, Nick Howard, Aro Mestah, Dillie Dixie, Pavel Christianovitch, Lennie DiMaggio and Shootright Crow.

Eru is at the end of the table, opposite the door, and maybe feels

this position puts it up to him to start the discussion; he opens by remarking "So nobody took the opportunity to withdraw."

Cray Patterson lifts his eyebrows ceilingwards and drawls out that the decision was supposed to be a private one.

B says "Maybe but it did not work out that way, everyone who learned Morse knows who was on the ship, anyway they are all still here so what does it matter? And M'Clare would not have picked people who were going to funk it, after all."

My chair gets a kick on the ankle which I suppose was meant for B; Eru is six foot five but even his legs do not quite reach; he is the only one of us facing the door.

M'Clare has somehow shed his weariness; he looks stern but fresh as a daisy. There are four with him; Ram and Peter looking serious, one stranger in Evercleans looking determined to enjoy the party and another in uniform looking as though nothing would make him.

M'Clare introduces the strangers as Colonel Delano-Smith and Mr. Yardo. They all sit down at the other end of the table; then he frowns at us and begins like this:

"Miss Laydon is mistaken. You were not selected on any such grounds as she suggests. I may say that I was astonished at the readiness with which you all engaged yourselves to take part in such a desperate gamble; and, seeing that for the last four years I have been trying to persuade you that it is worth while, before making a decision of any importance, to spend a certain amount of thought on it, I was discouraged as well."

Oh.

"The criterion upon which you were selected was a very simple one. As I told you, you were picked not by me but by a computer; the one in the College Office which registers such information as your home addresses and present whereabouts. You are simply that section of the class which could be picked up without attracting attention, because you all happened to be on holiday by yourselves or with other members of the class; and because your nearest relatives are not on Earth at present."

Oh, well.

All of us can see M'Clare is doing a job of deflation on us for reasons of his own, but it works for all that.

He now seems to feel the job is complete and relaxes a bit.

"I was interested to see that you all, without exception, hit on variations of the same idea. It is of course the obvious way to deal with the problem." He smiles at us suddenly and I get mad at myself because I know he is following the rules for introducing a desired state of mind, but I am responding as meant. "I'll read you the most succinct expression of it; you may be able to guess the author."

Business with bits of paper.

"Here it is. I quote: 'Drag in some outsider looks like he is going for both sides; they will gang up on him.'"

Yells of laughter and shouts of "Lizzie Lee!" even the two strangers produce sympathetic grins; I do not find it so funny as all that myself.

"Ideas as to the form the 'outsider' should take were more varied. This is a matter I propose to leave you to work out together, with the assistance of Colonel Delano-Smith and Mr. Yardo. Te Whangoa, you take the chair."

Exit M'Clare.

This leaves the two halves of the table eying one another. Ram and Peter have been through this kind of session in their time; now they are leaning back preparing to watch us work. It is plain we are supposed to impress the abilities of Russett near-graduates on the two strangers, and for some moments we are all occupied taking them in. Colonel Delano-Smith is a small, neat guy with a face that has all the muscular machinery for producing an expression; he just doesn't care to use it. Mr. Yardo is taller than any of us except Eru and flesh is spread very thin on his bones, including his face which splits now and then in a grin like an affable skeleton. Where the colonel fits is guessable enough, Mr. Yardo is presumably Expert at something but no data on *what*.

Eru rests his hands on the table and says we had better start; will somebody kindly outline an idea for making the Incognitans "gang up"? The simpler the better and it does not matter whether it is workable or not; pulling it to pieces will give us a start.

We all wait to see who will rush in; then I catch Eru's eye and see I am elected Clown again. I say "Send them a letter postmarked

Outer Space signed BEM saying we lost our own planet in a nova and will take over theirs two weeks from Tuesday."

Mr. Yardo utters a sharp "Ha! Ha!" but it is not seconded; the colonel having been expressionless all along becomes more so; Eru says, "Thank you, Lizzie." He looks across at Cray who is opposite me; Cray says there are many points on which he might comment; to take only one, two weeks from Tuesday leaves little time for 'ganging up', and what happens when the BEMs fail to come?

We are suddenly back in the atmosphere of a seminar; Eru's glance moves to P. Zapotec sitting next to Cray, and he says, "These BEMs who lost their home planet in a nova, how many ships have they? Without a base they cannot be very dangerous unless their fleet is very large."

It goes round the table.

Pavel: "How would BEMs learn to write?"

Nick: "How are they supposed to know that Incognita is inhabited? How do they address the letter?"

The Crow: "Huh. Why write letters? Invaders just invade."

Kirsty: "We don't want to inflame these people against alien races. We might find one some day. It seems to me this idea might have all sorts of undesirable by-products. Suppose each side regards it as a ruse on the part of the other. We might touch off a war instead of preventing it. Suppose they turn over to preparations for repelling the invaders, to an extent that cripples their economy? Suppose a panic starts?"

Dilly: "Say, Mr. Chairman, is there any of this idea left at all? How about an interim summary?"

Eru coughs to get a moment for thought, then says:

"In brief, the problem is to provide a menace against which the two groups will be forced to unite. It must have certain characteristics.

"It must be sufficiently far off in time for the threat to last several years, long enough to force them into a real combination.

"It must obviously be a plausible danger and they must get to know of it in a plausible manner. Invasion from outside is the only threat so far suggested.

"It must be a limited threat. That is, it must appear to come from

one well-defined group. The rest of the Universe should appear benevolent or neutral."

He just stops, rather as though there is something else to come; while the rest of us are waiting B sticks her oar in to the following effect.

"Yes, but look, suppose this goes wrong; it's all very well to make plans but suppose we get some of Kirsty's side-effects just the same, well what I mean is suppose it makes the mess worse instead of better we want some way we can sort of switch it off again.

"Look this is just an illustration, but suppose the Menace was pirates, if it went wrong we could have an Earth ship make official contact and they could just happen to say By the way have you seen anything of some pirates, Earth fleet wiped them up in this sector about six months ago.

"That would mean the whole crew conniving, so it won't do, but you see what I mean."

There is a bit of silence, then Aro says, "I think we should start fresh. We have had criticisms of Lizzie's suggestion, which was not perhaps wholly serious, and as Dilly says there is little of it left, except the idea of a threat of invasion. The idea of an alien intelligent race has objections and would be very difficult to fake. The invaders must be men from another planet. Another unknown one. But how do the people of Incognita come to know that they exist?"

More silence, then I hear my own voice speaking although it was my intention to keep quiet for once: it sounds kind of creaky and it says: "A ship. A crashed ship from Outside."

Whereupon another voice says, "Really! Am I expected to swallow this?"

We had just about forgotten the colonel, not to mention Mr. Yardo who contributes another "Ha! Ha!" so this reminder comes as a slight shock, nor do we see what he is talking about but this he proceeds to explain.

"I don't know why M'Clare thought it necessary to stage this discussion. I am already acquainted with his plan and have had orders to co-operate. I have expressed my opinion on using

undergraduates in a job like this and have been overruled. If he, or you, imagine that priming you to bring out his ideas like this is going to reconcile me to the whole business you are mistaken. He might have chosen a more suitable mouthpiece than that child with the curly hair—"

Here everybody wishes to reply at once; the resulting jam produces a moment of silence and I get in first.

"As for curly hair I am rising twenty-four and I was only saying what we all thought, if we have the same ideas as M'Clare that is because he taught us for four years. How else would you set about it anyway?"

My fellow students pick up their stylers and tap solemnly three times on the table; this is the Russett equivalent of "Hear! Hear!" and the colonel is surprised.

Eru says coldly, "This discussion has not been rehearsed. As Lizzie … as Miss Lee says, we have been working and thinking together for four years and have been taught by the same people."

"Very well," says Delano-Smith testily. "Tell me this, please: Do you regard this idea as practicable?"

Cray tilts his chair back and remarks to the ceiling, "This is rather a farce. I suppose we had to go through our paces for the colonel's benefit—and Mr. Yardo's of course—but can't we be briefed properly now?"

"What do you mean by that?" snaps the colonel.

"It's been obvious right along," says Cray, balancing his styler on one forefinger, "so obvious none of us has bothered to mention it, that accepting the normal limitations of Mass-Time, the idea of interfering in Incognita was doomed before it began. No conventional ship would have much hope of arriving before war broke out; and if it did arrive it couldn't do anything effective. Therefore I assume that this is not a conventional ship. I might accept that the Government has sent us out in a futile attempt to do the impossible, but I wouldn't believe that of M'Clare."

Cray is the only Terry I know acts like an Outsider's idea of one; many find this difficult to take and the colonel is plainly one of them. Eru intervenes quickly.

"I imagine we all realized that. Anyway this ship is obviously not

a conventional model. If you accept the usual Mass-Time relationship between the rate of transition and the fifth power of the apparent acceleration, we must have reached about four times the maximum already."

"Ram!" says B suddenly, "What did you do to stop the Hotel scope registering the little ship you picked up me and Lizzie in?"

Everybody cuts in with something they have noticed about the capabilities of this ship or the hoppers, and Lenny starts hammering on the table and chanting! "Brief! Brief! Brief!" and others are just starting to join in when Eru bangs on the table and glares us all down.

Having got silence, he says very quietly, "Colonel Delano-Smith, I doubt whether this discussion can usefully proceed without a good deal more information; will you take over?"

The colonel looks round at all the eager earnest interested maps hastily put on for his benefit and decides to take the plunge.

"Very well. I suppose it is … very well. The decision to use students from Russett was made at a very high level, and I suppose —" Instead of saying "Very well" again he shrugs his shoulders and gets down to it.

"The report from the planet we decided to call 'Incognita' was received thirty-one days ago. The Department of Spatial Affairs has certain resources which are not generally known. This ship is one of them. She works on a modified version of Mass-Time which enables her to use about a thousand channels instead of the normal limit of two hundred; for good and sufficient reasons this has not been generally released."

Pause while we are silently dared to doubt the Virtue and sufficiency of these reasons which personally I do not.

"To travel to Incognita direct would take about fifteen days by the shortest route. We shall take eighteen days as we shall have to make a detour."

But presumably we shall take only fifteen days back. Hurrah we can spend a week round the planet and still be back in time for Commemoration. We shall skip maybe a million awkward questions and I shall not disappoint Dad.

It is plain the colonel is not filled with joy; far from it, he did not

enjoy revealing a Departmental secret however obvious, but he likes the next item even less.

"We shall detour to an uninhabited system twelve days' transit time from here and make contact with another ship, the *Gilgamesh*."

At which Lennie DiMaggio who has been silent till now brings his fist down on the table and exclaims, "You *can't*!"

Lennie is much upset for some reason; Delano-Smith gives him a peculiar look and says what does he know about it? and Lennie starts to stutter.

Cray remarks that Lennie's childhood hobby appears to have been spaceships and he suffers from arrested development.

B says it is well known Lennie is mad about the Space Force and why not? It seems to have uses Go on and tell us Lennie.

Lennie says "*G-Gilgamesh* was lost three hundred years ago!"

"The flaw in that statement," says Cray after a pause, "is that this may be another ship of the same name."

"No," says the colonel. "Explorer Class cruiser. They went out of service two hundred eighty years back."

The Space Force, I remember, does not re-use names of lost ships: some says Very Proper Feeling some say Superstitious Rot.

B says, "When was she found again?"

Lennie says it was j-just thirty-seven revolutions of his native planet which means f-f-fifty-three Terrestrial years ago, she was found by an Interplanetary scout called *Crusoe*.

Judging by the colonel's expression this data is Classified; he does not know that Lennie's family come from one of the oldest settled planets and are space-goers to a man, woman, and juvenile; they pick up ship gossip the way others hear about the relations of people next door.

Lennie goes on to say that the Explorer Class were the first official exploration ships sent out from Earth when the Terries decided to find out what happened to the colonies formed during the Exodus. *Gilgamesh* was the first to re-make contact with Garuda, Legba, Lister, Cor-bis and Antelope; she vanished on her third voyage.

"Where was she found?" asks Eru.

"Near the p-p-pole of an uninhabited planet—maybe I shouldn't say where because that may be secret, but the rest's History if you know where to look."

Maybe the colonel approves this discretion; anyway his face thaws very slightly unless I am Imagining it.

"*Gilgamesh* crashed," he says. "Near as we can make out from the log, she visited Seleucis system. That's a swarmer sun. Fifty-seven planets, three settled; and any number of fragments. The navigator calculated that after a few more revolutions one of the fragments was going to crash on an inhabited planet. Might have done a lot of damage. They decided to tow it out of the way.

"Grappling-beams hadn't been invented. They thought they could use Mass-Time on it a kind of reverse thrust—throw it off course.

"Mass-Time wasn't so well understood then. Bit off more than they could chew. Set up a topological relation that drained all the free energy out of the system. Drive, heating system—everything.

"She had emergency circuits. When the engines came on again they took over—landed the ship, more or less, on the nearest planet. Too late, of course. Heating system never came on—there was a safety switch that had to be thrown by hand. She was embedded in ice when she was found. Hull breached at one point—no other serious damage."

"And the … the crew?"

Dillie ought to know better than that.

"Lost with all hands," says the colonel.

"How about weapons?"

We are all startled. Cray is looking whitish like the rest of us but maintains his normal manner, i.e. offensive affection while pointing out that *Gilgamesh* can hardly be taken for a Menace unless she has some means of aggression about her.

Lennie says The Explorer Class were all armed—

Fine, says Cray, presumably the weapons will be thoroughly obsolete and recognizable only to a Historian—

Lennie says the construction of no weapon developed by the

Space Department has ever been released; making it plain that anyone but a Nitwit knows that already.

Eru and Kirsty have been busy for some time writing notes to each other and she now gives a small sharp cough and having collected our attention utters the following Address.

"There is a point we seem to have missed. If I may recapitulate, the idea is to take this ship *Gilgamesh* to Incognita and make it appear as though she had crashed there while attempting to land. I understand that the ship has been buried in the polar cap; though she must have been melted out if the people on *Crusoe* examined the engines. Of course the cold—All the same there may have been … well … changes. Or when … when we thaw the ship out again—"

I find I am swallowing good and hard, and several of the others look sick, especially Lennie. Lennie has his eyes fixed on the colonel; it is not prescience, but a slight sideways movement of the colonel's eye causes him to blurt out, "What is *he* doing here?"

Meaning Mr. Yardo who seems to have been asleep for some time, with his eyes open and grinning like the spikes on a dog collar. The colonel gives him another sideways look and says, "Mr. Yardo is an expert on the rehabilitation of space-packed materials."

This is stuff transported in un-powered hulls towed by grappling-beams; the hulls are open to space hence no need for refrigeration, and the contents are transferred to specially equipped orbital stations before being taken down to the planet. But—

Mr. Yardo comes to life at the sound of his name and his grin widens alarmingly.

"Especially meat," he says.

It is maybe two hours afterwards, Eru having adjourned the meeting abruptly so that we can … er … take in the implications of the new data. Lennie has gone off somewhere by himself; Kirsty has gone after him with a view to Mothering him; Eru, I suspect, is looking for Kirsty; Pavel and Aro and Dillie and the Crow are in a cabin arguing in whispers; Nick and P. Zapotec are exploring one of the Hoppers, cargo-carrying, drop-shaped, and I only hope they don't hop through the hull in it.

B and I having done a tour of the ship and ascertained all this have withdrawn to the Conference Room because we are tired of our cabins and this seems to be the only other place to sit.

B breaks a long silence with the remark that However often you see it M'Clare's technique is something to watch, like choosing my statement to open with, it broke the ice beautifully.

I say, "Shall I tell you something?"

B says Yes if it's interesting.

"My statement," I inform her, "ran something like this: The best hope of inducing a suspension of the aggressive attitude of both parties, long enough to offer hope of ultimate reconciliation, lies in the intrusion of a new factor in the shape of an outside force seen to be impartially hostile to both."

B says: "Gosh. Come to think of it Liz you have not written like that in years, you have gone all pompous like everyone else; well that makes it even *more* clever of M'Clare."

Enter Cray Patterson and drapes himself sideways on a chair, announcing that his own thoughts begin to weary him.

I say this does not surprise me, at all.

"Lizzie my love," says he, "you are twice blessed being not only witty yourself but a cause of wit in others; was that bit of Primitive Lee with which M'Clare regaled us really not from the hand of the mistress, or was it a mere pastiche?"

I say Whoever wrote that it was not me anyway.

"It seemed to me pale and luke-warm compared with the real thing," says Cray languidly, "which brings me to a point that, to quote dear Kirsty, seems to have been missed."

I say, "Yep. Like what language it was that these people wrote their log in that we can be *certain* the Incognitans won't know."

"More than that," says B, "we didn't decide who they are or where they were coming from or how they came to crash or anything."

"Come to think of it, though," I point out, "the language and a good many other things must have been decided already because of getting the right hypnotapes and translators on board."

B suddenly lights up.

"Yes, but look, I bet that's what we're here for, I mean that's why

they picked us instead of Space Department people—the ship's got to have a past history, it has to come from a planet somewhere only no one must ever find out *where* it's supposed to be. Someone will have to fake a log, only I don't see how—"

"The first reel with data showing the planet of origin got damaged during the crash," says Cray impatiently.

"Yes, of course—but we have to find a reason why they were in that part of Space and it has to be a *nice* one, I mean so that the Incognitans when they finally read the log won't hate them any more—"

"Maybe they were bravely defending their own planet by hunting down an interplanetary raider," I suggest.

Cray says it will take only the briefest contact with other planets to convince the Incognitans that interplanetary raiders can't and don't exist, modern planetary alarm and defense systems put them out of the question.

"That's all he knows," says B, "some interplanetary pirates raided Lizzie's father's farm once. Didn't they, Liz?"

"Yes in a manner of speaking, but they were bums who pinched a spaceship from a planet not many parsecs away, a sparsely inhabited mining world like my own which had no real call for an alarm system, so that hardly alters the argument."

"Well," says B, "the alarm system on Incognita can't be so hot or the observation ships could not have got in, or out, for that matter, unless of course they have some other gadget we don't know about."

"On the other hand," she considers, "to mention Interplanetary raiders raises the idea of Menace in an Unfriendly Universe again, and this is what we want to cancel out.

"These people," she says at last with a visionary look in her eye, "come from a planet which went isolationist and abandoned space travel; now they have built up their civilization to a point where they can build ships of their own again, and the ones on Gilgamesh have cut loose from the ideas of their ancestors that led to their going so far afield—"

"How far afield?" says Cray.

"No one will ever know," I point out to him. "Don't interrupt."

"Anyway," says B, "they set out to rejoin the rest of the Human

Race just like the people on *Gilgamesh really* did, in fact, a lot of this is the truth only kind of backwards—they were looking for the Cradle of the Race, that's what. Then there was some sort of disaster that threw them off course to land on an uninhabited section of a planet that couldn't understand their signals. And when Incognita finally does take to space flight again I bet the first thing the people do is to try and follow back to where *Gilgamesh* came from and make contact with them. It'll become a legend on Incognita—the Lost People ... the Lost ... Lost—"

"The Lost Kafoozalum," says Cray. "In other words we switch these people off a war only to send them on a wild goose chase."

At which a strange voice chimes in, "No, no, no, son, you've got it all *wrong*."

Mr. Yardo is with us like a well-meaning skeleton.

During the next twenty-five minutes we learn a lot about Mr. Yardo including material for a good guess at how he came to be picked for this expedition; doubtless there are many experts on Reversal Of Vacuum-Induced Changes in Organic Tissues but maybe only one of them a Romantic at heart.

Mr. Yardo thinks chasing the Wild Goose will do the Incognitans all the good in the galaxy, it will take their minds off controversies over interhemispherical trade and put them on to the quest of the Unobtainable; they will get to know something of the Universe outside their own little speck. Mr. Yardo has seen a good deal of the Universe in the course of advising on how to recondition space-packed meat and he found it an Uplifting Experience.

We gather he finds this desperate bit of damfoolery we are on now pretty Uplifting altogether.

Cray keeps surprisingly quiet but it is as well that the rest of the party start to trickle in about twenty minutes later the first arrivals remarking Oh *that's* where you've got to!

Presently we are all congregated at one end of the table as before, except that Mr. Yardo is now sitting between B and me; when M'Clare and the colonel come in he firmly stays where he is evidently considering himself One of Us now.

"The proposition," says M'Clare, "is that we intend to

take *Gilgamesh* to Incognita and land her there in such a way as to suggest that she crashed. In the absence of evidence to the contrary the Incognitans are bound to assume that that was her intended destination, and the presence of weapons, even disarmed, will suggest that her mission was aggressive. Firstly, can anyone suggest a better course of action? or does anyone object to this one?"

We all look at Lennie who sticks his hands in his pockets and mutters "No."

Kirsty gives her little cough and says there is a point which has not been mentioned.

If a heavily-armed ship crashes on Incognita, will not the government of the hemisphere in which it crashes be presented with new ideas for offensive weapons? And won't this make it *more* likely that they will start aggression? And won't the fear of this make the other hemisphere even more likely to try and get in first before the new weapons are complete?

Hell, I ought to have thought of that.

From the glance of unwilling respect which the colonel bestows on M'Clare it is plain these points have been dealt with.

"The weapons on Gilgamesh were disarmed when she was rediscovered," he says. "Essential sections were removed. The Incognitans won't be able to reconstruct how they worked."

Another fact for which we shall have to provide an explanation. Well how about this: The early explorers sent out by these people—the people in Gilgamesh … oh, use Cray's word and call them Lost Kafoozalum anyway their ships were armed, but they never found any enemies and the Idealists of B's story refused even to carry arms any more.

(Which is just about what happened when the Terries set out to rediscover the colonies, after all.)

So the Lost Kafoozalum could not get rid of their weapons completely because it would have meant rebuilding the ship; so they just partially dismantled them.

Mr. Yardo suddenly chips in, "About that other point, girlie, surely there must be some neutral ground left on a half-occupied planet like that?" He beams round, pleased at being able to contribute.

B says, "The thing is," and stops.

We wait.

We have about given up hope when she resumes, "The thing is, it will have to be neutral ground of course, only that might easily become a thingummy … I mean a, a *casus belli* in itself. So the *other* thing is it ought to be a place which is very hard to get at, so difficult that neither side can really get to it first, they'll have to reach an agreement and co-operate."

"Yeah," says Dillie "that sounds fine, but what sort of place is that?"

I am sorting out in my head the relative merits of mountains, deserts, gorges, et cetera, when I an seized with inspiration at the same time as half the group; we say the same thing in different words and for a time there is Babel, then the idea emerges:

"Drop her into the sea!"

The colonel nods resignedly.

"Yes," he says, "that's what we're going to do."

He presses a button and our projection-screens light up, first with a map of one pole of Incognita, expanding in scale till finally we are looking down on one little bit of coast on one of the polar islands. A glacier descends on to it from mountains inland and there is a bay between cliffs. Then we get a stereo scene of approximately the least hospitable of scenery I ever did see—except maybe when Parvati Lal Dutt's brother made me climb up what he swore was the smallest peak in the Himalayas.

It is a small bay backed by tumbled cliffs. A shelving beach can be deduced from contour and occasional boulders big enough to stick through the snow that smothers it all. A sort of mess of rocks and mud at the back may be glacial moraine. Over the sea the ice is split in all directions by jagged rifts and channels; the whole thing is a bit like Antarctica but nothing is high enough or white enough to uplift the spirit, it looks not only chilly but kind of mean.

"This place," says the colonel, "is the only one, about which we have any topographical information, that seems to meet the requirements. Got to know about it through an elementary planetography. One of the observers had the sense to see we might need something of the sort. This place"—the stereo jigs as he taps

his projector—"seems it's the center of a rising movement in the crust … that's not to the point. Neither side has bothered to claim the land at the poles… ."

I see their point if it's all like this—

"… And a ship trying to land on those cliffs might very well pitch over into the sea. That is, if she were trying to land on emergency rockets."

Rockets—that brings home the ancientness of this ship *Gilgamesh* —but after all the ships that settled Incognita probably carried emergency rockets, too.

This settled, the meeting turns into a briefing session and merges imperceptibly with the beginning of the job.

The job of course is Faking the background of the crash; working out the past history and present aims of the Lost Kafoozalum. We have to invent a planet and what's more difficult convey all the essential information about it by the sort of sideways hints you gather among peoples' personal possessions; diaries, letters et cetera; and what is even *more* difficult we have to leave out anything that could lead to definite identification of our unknown world with any known one.

We never gave that world a name; it might be dangerous. Who speaks of their world by name, except to strangers? They call it "home"—or "Earth," as often as not.

Some things have been decided for us. Language, for instance—one of two thousand or so Earth tongues that went out of use late enough to be plausible as the main language of a colonized planet. The settlers on Incognita were not of the sort to take along dictionaries of the lesser-known tongues, so the computers at Russett had a fairly wide choice.

We had to take a hypnocourse in that language. Ditto the script, one of several forgotten phonetic shorthands. (Designed to enable the tongues of Aliens to be written down; but the Aliens have never been met. It is plausible enough that some colony might have kept the script alive; after all Thasia uses something of the sort to this day.)

The final result of our work looks pretty small. Twenty-three

"Personal Background Sets"—a few letters, a diary in some, an assortment of artifacts. Whoever stocked this ship we are on supplied wood, of the half-dozen kinds that have been taken wherever men have gone; stocks of a few plastics—known at the time of the Exodus, or easily developed from those known, and not associated with any particular planet. Also books on Design, a Form-writer for translating drawings into materials, and so on. Someone put in a lot of work before this voyage began.

Most of the time it is like being back on Russet doing a group Project. What we are working on has no more and no less reality than that. Our work is all read into a computer and checked against everybody else's. At first we keep clashing. Gradually a consistent picture builds up and gets translated finally into the Personal Background Kits. The Lost Kafoozalum start to exist like people in a History book.

Fifteen days hard work and we have just about finished; then we reach—call it Planet Gilgamesh.

I wake in my bunk to hear that there will be brief cessation of weight; strap down, please.

We are coming off Mass-Time to go on planetary drive.

Colonel Delano-Smith is in charge of operations on the planet, with Ram and Peter to assist. None of the rest of us see the melting out of fifty years' accumulation of ice, the pumping away of the water, the fitting and testing of the holds for the grappling-beams. We stay inside the ship, on five-eighths gee which we do not have time to get used to, and try to work, and discard the results before the computer can do so. There is hardly any work left to do, anyway.

It takes nearly twelve hours to get the ship free, and caulked, and ready to lift. (Her hull has to be patched because of Mr. Yardo's operations which make use of several sorts of vapors). Then there is a queer blind period with Up now one way, now another, and sudden jerks and tugs that upset everything not in gimbals or tied down; interspersed with periods when weightlessness supervenes with no warning at all. After an hour or two of this it would be hard to say whether Mental or physical discomfort is more acute; B consulted, however, says my autonomic system must be quite something, after five minutes *her* thoughts were with her viscera

entirely.

Then, suddenly, we are back on Mass-Time again.

Two days to go.

At first being on Mass-Time makes everything seem normal again. By sleep time there is a strain, and next day it is everywhere. I know as well as any that on Mass-Time the greater the mass the faster the shift; all the same I cannot help feeling we are being slowed, dragged back by the dead ship coupled to our live one.

When you stand by the hull *Gilgamesh* is only ten feet away.

I should have kept something to work on like B and Kirsty who have not done their Letters for Home in Case of Accidents; mine is signed and sealed long ago. I am making a good start on a Neurosis when Delano-Smith announces a Meeting for one hour ahead.

Hurrah! now there is a time-mark fixed I think of all sorts of things I should have done before; for instance taking a look at the controls of the Hoppers.

I have been in one of them half an hour and figured out most of the dials—Up down and sideways are controlled much as in a helicar, but here a big viewscreen has been hooked in to the autopilot—when across the hold I see the air lock start to move.

Gilgamesh is on the other side.

It takes forever to open. When at last it swings wide on the dark tunnel what comes through is a storage rack, empty, floating on antigrav.

What follows is a figure in a spacesuit; modern type, but the windows of the hopper are semipolarized and I cannot make out the face inside the bubble top.

He slings the rack upon the bulkhead, takes off the helmet and hangs that up, too. Then he just stands. I am beginning to muster enough sense to wonder why when he comes slowly across the hold.

Reaching the doorway he says: "Oh it's you, Lizzie. You'll have to help me out of this. I'm stuck."

M'Clare.

The outside of the suit is still freezing cold; maybe this is what

has jammed the fastening. After a few minutes tugging it suddenly gives away. M'Clare climbs out of the suit, leaving it standing, and says, "Help me count these, will you?"

These are a series of transparent containers from a pouch slung at one side of the suit. I recognize them as the envelopes in which we put what are referred to as Personal Background Sets.

I say, "There ought to be twenty-three."

"No," says M'Clare dreamily, "twenty-two, we're saving one of them."

"What on earth is the use of an extra set of faked documents and oddments—"

He seems to wake up suddenly and says: "What are you doing here, Lizzie?"

I explain and he wanders over to the hopper and starts to explain the controls.

There is something odd about all this. M'Clare is obviously dead tired, but kind of relaxed; seeing that the hour of Danger is only thirty-six hours off I don't understand it. Probably several of his students are going to have to risk their lives—

I am on the point of seeing something important when the speaker announces in the colonel's voice that Professor M'Clare and Miss Lee will report to the Conference Room at once please.

M'Clare looks at me and grins. "Come along, Lizzie. Here's where we take orders for once, you and I."

It is the colonel's Hour. I suppose that having to work with Undergraduates is something he could never quite forget, but from the way he looks at us we might almost be Space Force personnel,—low-grade of course but respectable.

Everything is at last worked out and he has it on paper in front of him; he puts the paper four square on the table, gazes into the middle distance and proceeds to recite.

"One. This ship will go off Mass-Time on 2nd August at 11.27 hours ship's time… .

"Thirty-six hours from now.

"… At a point one thousand miles vertically above Co-ordinates 165OE, 7320S, on Planet Incognita, approximately one hour before

midnight local time.

"Going on planetary drive as close as that will indicate that something is badly wrong to begin with.

"Two. This ship will descend, coupled to *Gilgamesh* as at present, to a point seventy miles above the planetary surface. It will then uncouple, discharge one hopper, and go back on Mass-Time. Estimated time for this stage of descent forty minutes.

"Three. The hopper will then descend on its own engines at the maximum speed allowed by the heat-disposal system; estimated at thirty-seven minutes. *Gilgamesh* will complete descent in thirty-three minutes. Engines of *Gilgamesh* will not be used except for the heat-disposal and gyro auxiliaries. The following installations have been made to allow for the control of the descent; a ring of eight rockets in peltathene mounts around the tail and, and one outsize antigrav unit inside the nose. "Sympathizer" controls hooked up with a visiscreen and a computer have also been installed in the nose.

"Four. *Gilgamesh* will carry one man only. The hopper will carry a crew of three. The pilot of *Gilgamesh* will establish the ship on the edge of the cliff, supported on antigrav a foot or so above the ground and leaning towards the sea at an angle of approximately 20° with the vertical. Except for this landing will be automatic.

"Five."

The colonel's voice has lulled us into passive acceptance; now we are jerked into sharper attention by the faintest possible check in it.

"The greatest danger attaching to the expedition is that the Incognitans may discover that the crash has been faked. This would be inevitable if they were to capture (a) the hopper; (b) any of the new installations in Gilgamesh, especially the antigrav; (c) any member of the crew.

"The function of the hopper is to pick up the pilot of *Gilgamesh* and also to check that ground appearances are consistent. If not, they will produce a landslip on the cliff edge, using power tools and explosives carried for the purpose. That is why the hopper has a crew of three, but the chance of their having to do this is slight."

So I should think; ground appearances are supposed to show that *Gilgamesh* landed using emergency rockets and then toppled

over the cliff and this will be exactly what happened.

"The pilot will carry a one-frequency low-power transmitter activated by the change in magnetic field on leaving the ship. The hopper will remain at five hundred feet until this signal is received. It will then pick up the pilot, check ground appearances, and rendezvous with this ship at two hundred miles up at 18.27 hours."

The ship and the hopper both being radar-absorbent will not register on alarm systems, and by keeping to planetary nighttime they should be safe from being seen.

"Danger (b) will be dealt with as follows. The rocket-mounts being of peltathene will be destroyed by half an hour's immersion in water. The installations in the nose will be destroyed with Andite."

Andite produces complete colecular disruption in a very short range, hardly any damage outside it; the effect will be as though the nose broke off on impact; I suppose the Incognitans will waste a lot of time looking for it on the bed of the sea.

"Four ten-centimeter cartridges will be inserted within the nose installations. The fuse will have two alternative settings. The first will be timed to act at 12.50 hours, seven minutes after the estimated time of landing. It will not be possible to deactivate it before 12.45 hours. This takes care of the possibility of the pilot's becoming incapacitated during the descent.

"Having switched off the first fuse the pilot will get the ship into position and then activate a second, timed to blow in ten minutes. He will then leave the ship. When the antigrav is destroyed the ship will, of course, fall into the sea.

"Six. The pilot of *Gilgamesh* will wear a spacesuit of the pattern used by the original crew and will carry Personal Background Set number 23. Should he fail to escape from the ship the crew of the hopper will on no account attempt to rescue him."

The colonel takes up the paper, folds it in half and puts it down one inch further away.

"The hopper's crew," he says, "will give the whole game away should one of them fall into Incognitan hands, alive or dead. Therefore they don't take any risks of it."

He lifts his gaze ceilingwards. "I'm asking for three volunteers."

Silence. Manning the hopper is definitely second best. Then light

suddenly bursts on me and I lift my hand and hack B on the ankle.

"I volunteer," I say.

B gives me a most dubious glance and then lifts her hand, too.

Cray on the other side of the table is slowly opening his mouth when there is an outburst of waving on the far side of B.

"Me too, colonel! I volunteer!"

Mr. Yardo proceeds to explain that his special job is over and done, he can be more easily spared than anybody, he may be too old to take charge of *Gilgamesh* but will back himself as a hopper pilot against anybody.

The colonel cuts this short by accepting all three. He then unfolds his paper again.

"Piloting *Gilgamesh*," he says. "I'm not asking for volunteers now. You'll go to your cabins in four hours' time and those who want to will volunteer, secretly. To a computer hookup, Computer will select on a random basis and notify the one chosen. Give him his final instructions, too. No one need know who it was till it's all over. He can tell anyone he likes, of course."

A very slight note of triumph creeps into the next remark. "One point. Only men need volunteer."

Instant outcry from Kirsty and Dilly: B turns to me with a look of awe.

"Nothing to do with prejudice," says the colonel testily. "Just facts. The crew of *Gilgamesh* were all men. Can't risk one solitary woman being found on board. Besides—spacesuits, personal background sets—all designed for men."

Kirsty and Dilly turn on me looks designed to shrivel and B whispers "Lizzie how wonderful you are."

The session dissolves. We three get an intensive session course of instruction on our duties and are ordered off to sleep. After breakfast next morning I run into Cray who says, Before I continue about what is evidently pressing business would I care to kick him, hard?

Not right now I reply, what for anyway?

"Miss Lee," says Cray, dragging it out longer than ever, "although

I have long realized that your brain functions in a way much superior to logic I had not sense enough yesterday to follow my own instinct and do what you do as soon as you did it; therefore that dessicated meat handler got in first."

I say: "So you weren't picked for pilot? It was only one chance in ten."

"Oh," says Cray, "did you really think so?" He gives me a long look and goes away.

I suppose he noticed that when the colonel came out with his remarks about No women in Gilgamesh I was as surprised as any.

Presently the three of us are issued with protective clothing; we just might have to venture out on the planet's surface and therefore we get white one-piece suits to protect against Cold, heat, moisture, dessication, radioactivity, and mosquitoes, and they are quite becoming, really.

B and I drag out dressing for thirty minutes; then we just sit while Time crawls asymptotically towards the hour.

Then the speaker calls us to go.

We are out of the cabin before it says two words and racing for the hold; so that we are just in time to see a figure out of an Historical movie—padded, jointed, tin bowl for head and blank reflecting glass where the face should be—stepping through the air lock.

The colonel and Mr. Yardo are there already. The colonel packs us into the hopper and personally closes the door, and for once I know what he is thinking; he is wishing he were not the only pilot in this ship who could possibly rely on bringing the ship off and on Mass-Time at one particular defined spot of Space.

Then he leaves us; half an hour to go.

The light in the hold begins to alter. Instead of being softly diffused it separates into sharp-edged beams, reflecting and crisscrossing but leaving cones of shadow between. The air is being pumped into store.

Fifteen minutes.

The hull vibrates and a hatch slides open in the floor so that the black of Space looks through; it closes again.

Mr. Yardo lifts the hopper gently off its mounts and lets it back

again.

Testing; five minutes to go.

I am hypnotized by my chronometer; the hands are crawling through glue; I am still staring at it when, at the exact second, we go off Mass-Time.

No weight. I hook my heels under the seat and persuade my esophagus back into place. A new period of waiting has begun. Every so often comes the impression we are falling head-first; the colonel using ship's drive to decelerate the whole system. Then more free fall.

The hopper drifts very slowly out into the hold and hovers over the hatch, and the lights go. There is only the glow from the visiscreen and the instrument board.

One minute thirty seconds to go.

The hatch slides open again. I take a deep breath.

I am still holding it when the colonel's voice comes over the speaker: "Calling *Gilgamesh*. Calling the hopper. Good-by and Good luck. You're on your own."

The ship is gone.

Yet another stretch of time has been marked off for us. Thirty-seven minutes, the least time allowable if we are not to get overheated by friction with the air. Mr. Yardo is a good pilot; he is concentrating wholly on the visiscreen and the thermometer. B and I are free to look around.

I see nothing and say so.

I did not know or have forgotten that Incognita has many small satellites; from here there are four in sight.

I am still looking at them when B seizes my arm painfully and points below us.

I see nothing and say so.

B whispers it was there a moment ago, it is pretty cloudy down there—Yes Lizzie there it is *look*.

And I see it. Over to the left, very faint and far below, a pin-prick of light.

Light in the polar wastes of a sparsely inhabited planet, and since

we are still five miles up it is a very powerful light too.

No doubt about it, as we descend farther; about fifty miles from our objective there are men, quite a lot of them.

I think it is just then that I understand, *really* understand, the hazard of what we are doing. This is not an exercise. This is in dead earnest, and if we have missed an essential factor or calculated something wrong the result will be not a bad mark or a failed exam, or even our personal deaths, but incalculable harm and misery to millions of people we never even heard of.

Dead earnest. How in Space did we ever have cheek enough for this?

The lights might be the essential factor we have missed, but there is nothing we can do about them now.

Mr. Yardo suddenly chuckles and points to the screen.

"There you are, girlies! He's down!"

There, grayly dim, is the map the colonel showed us; and right on the faint line of the cliff-edge is a small brilliant dot.

The map is expanding rapidly, great lengths of coastline shooting out of sight at the edge of the screen. Mr. Yardo has the cross-hairs centered on the dot which is *Gilgamesh*. The dot is changing shape; it is turning into a short ellipse, a longer one. The gyros are leaning her out over the sea.

I look at my chronometer; 12.50 hours exactly. B looks, too, and grips my hand.

Thirty seconds later the Andite has not blown; first fuse safety turned off. Surely she is leaning far enough out by now?

We are hovering at five hundred feet. I can actually see the white edge of the sea beating at the cliff. Mr. Yardo keeps making small corrections; there is a wind out there trying to blow us away. It is cloudy here: I can see neither moons nor stars.

Mr. Yardo checks the radio. Nothing yet.

I stare downwards and fancy I can see a metallic gleam.

Then there is a wordless shout from Mr. Yardo; a bright dot hurtles across the screen and at the same time I see a streak of blue flame tearing diagonally downwards a hundred feet away.

The hopper shudders to a flat concussion in the air, we are all

thrown off balance, and when I claw my way back to the screen the moving dot is gone.

So is *Gilgamesh*.

B says numbly, "But it wasn't a meteor. It can't have been."

"It doesn't matter what it was," I say. "It was some sort of missile, I think. They must be even nearer to war than we thought."

We wait. What for, I don't know. Another missile, perhaps. No more come.

At last Mr. Yardo stirs. His voice sounds creaky.

"I guess," he says, then clears his throat, and tries again. "I guess we have to go back up."

B says, "Lizzie, who was it? Do you know?"

Of course I do. "Do you think M'Clare was going to risk one of us on that job? The volunteering was a fake. He went himself."

B whispers, "You're just guessing."

"Maybe," says Mr. Yardo, "but I happened to see through that face plate of his. It was the professor all right."

He has his hand on the controls when my brain starts working again. I utter a strangled noise and dive for the hatch into the cargo hold. B tries to grab me but I get it open and switch on the light.

Fifty-fifty chance—I've lost.

No, this is the one we came in and the people who put in the new cargo did not clear out my fish-boat, they just clamped it neatly to the wall.

I dive in and start to pass up the package. B shakes her head.

"No, Lizzie. We can't. Don't you remember? If we got caught, it would give everything away. Besides … there isn't any chance—"

"Take a look at the screen," I tell her.

Sharp exclamation from Mr. Yardo. B turns to look, then takes the package and helps me back.

Mr. Yardo maneuvers out over the sea till the thing is in the middle of the screen; then drops to a hundred feet. It is sticking out of the water at a fantastic angle and the waves are hardly moving it. The nose of a ship.

"The antigrav," whispers B. "The Andite hasn't blown yet."

"Ten minutes," says Mr. Yardo thoughtfully. He turns to me with sudden briskness. "What's that, Lizzie girl? A fish-boat? Good. We may need it. Let's have a look."

"It's mine," I tell him.

"Now look—"

"Tailor made," I say. "You might get into it, though I doubt it. You couldn't work the controls."

It takes him fifteen seconds to realize there is no way round it; he is six foot three and I am five foot one. Even B would find it hard.

His face goes grayish and he stares at me helplessly. Finally he nods.

"All right, Lizzie. I guess we have to try it. Things certainly can't be much worse than they are. We'll go over to the beach there."

On the beach there is wind and spray and breakers but nothing unmanageable; the cliffs on either side keep off the worst of the force. It is queer to feel moving air after eighteen days in a ship. It takes six minutes to unpack and expand the boat and by that time it is ten minutes since the missile hit and the Andite has not blown.

I crawl into the boat. In my protective clothing it is a fairly tight fit. We agree that I will return to this same point and they will start looking for me in fifty minutes' time and will give up if I have not returned in two hours. I take two Andite cartridges to deal with all eventualities and snap the nose of the boat into place. At first I am very conscious of the two little white cigars in the pouch of my suit, but presently I have other things to think about.

I use the "limbs" to crawl the last few yards of shingle into the water and on across the sea bottom till I am beyond the line of breakers; then I turn on the motor. I have already set the controls to "home" on *Gilgamesh* and the radar will steer me off any obstructions. This journey in the dark is as safe as my trip around the reefs before all this started—though it doesn't feel that way.

It takes twelve minutes to reach *Gilgamesh,* or rather the fragment that antigrav is supporting; it is about half a mile from the beach.

The radar stops me six feet from her and I switch it off and turn to Manual and inch closer in.

Lights, a very small close beam. The missile struck her about one

third of her length behind the nose. I know, because I can see the whole of that length. It is hanging just above the water, sloping at about 30° to the horizontal. The ragged edge where it was torn from the rest is just dipping into the sea.

If anyone sees this, I don't know what they will make of it but no one could possibly think an ordinary spaceship suffered an ordinary crash, and very little investigation would show up the truth.

I reach up with the forward set of "limbs" and grapple on to the break. I now have somehow to get the hind set of "limbs" up without losing my grip. I can't.

It takes several minutes to realize that I can just open the nose and crawl out.

Immediately a wave hits me in the face and does its best to drag me into the sea. However the interior of the ship is relatively sheltered and presently I am inside and dragging the boat up out of reach.

I need light. Presently I manage to detach one of the two from the boat. I turn it down to minimum close beam and hang it round my neck; then I start up the black jag-edged tunnel of the ship.

I have to get to the nose, find the fuse, change the setting to twenty minutes—maximum possible—and get out before it blows—out of the water I mean. The fish-boat is not constructed to take explosions even half a mile away. But the first thing is to find the fuse and I cannot make out how *Gilgamesh* is lying and therefore cannot find the door through this bulkhead; everything is ripped and twisted. In the end I find a gap between the bulkhead itself and the hull, and squeeze through that.

In the next compartment things are more recognizable and I eventually find the door. Fortunately ships are designed so that you can get through doors even when they are in the ceiling; actually here I have to climb up an overhang, but the surface is provided with rungs which make it not too bad. Finally I reach the door. I shall have to use antigrav to get down … why didn't I just turn it on and jump? I forgot I had it.

The door was a little way open when the missile struck; it buckled in its grooves and is jammed fast. I can get an arm through. No more. I switch on antigrav and hang there directing the light round the compartment. No rents anywhere, just buckling. This

compartment is divided by a partition and the door through that is open. There will be another door into the nose on the other side.

I bring back my feet ready to kick off on a dive through that doorway.

Behind me, something stirs.

My muscles go into a spasm like the one that causes a falling dream, my hold tears loose and I go tumbling through the air, rebound from a wall, twist, and manage to hook one foot in the frame of the door I was aiming for. I pull myself down and turn off the antigrav; then I just shake for a bit.

The sound was—

This is stupid, with everything torn to pieces in this ship there is no wonder if bits shake loose and drop around—

But it was not a metallic noise, it was a kind of soft dragging, very soft, that ended in a little thump.

Like a—

Like a loose piece of plastic dislodged from its angle of rest and slithering down, pull yourself together Lizzie Lee.

I look through the door into the other half of this level. Shambles. Smashed machinery every which way, blocking the door, blocking everything. No way through at all.

Suddenly I remember the tools. Mr. Yardo loaded the fish-boat with all it would take. I crawl back and return with a fifteen inch expanding beam-lever, and overuse it; the jammed trap door does not slide back in its grooves but flips right out of them, bent double; it flies off into the dark and clangs its way to rest.

I am halfway through the opening when I hear the sound again. A soft slithering; a faint defeated thump.

I freeze where I am, and then I hear the sigh; a long, long weary sound, almost musical.

An air leak somewhere in the hull and wind or waves altering the air pressure below.

All the same I do not seem able to come any farther through this door.

Light might help; I turn the beam up and play it cautiously

around. This is the last compartment, right in the nose; a sawn-off cone-shape. No breaks here, though the hull is buckled to my left and the "floor"—the partition, horizontal when the ship is in the normal operating position, which holds my trap door—is torn up; some large heavy object was welded to a thin surface skin which has ripped away leaving jagged edges and a pattern of girders below.

There is no dust here; it has all been sucked out when the ship was open to space; nothing to show the beam except the sliding yellow ellipse where it touches the wall. It glides and turns, spiraling down, deformed every so often where it crosses a projection or a dent, till it halts suddenly on a spoked disk, four feet across and standing nearly eighteen inches out from the wall. The antigrav.

I never saw one this size, it is like the little personal affairs as a giant is like a pigmy, not only bigger but a bit different in proportion. I can see an Andite cartridge fastened among the spokes.

The fuse is a "sympathizer" but it is probably somewhere close. The ellipse moves again. There is no feeling that I control it; it is hunting on its own. To and fro around the giant wheel. Lower. It halts on a small flat box, also bolted to the wall, a little way below. This is it, I can see the dial.

The ellipse stands still, surrounding the fuse. There is something at the very edge of it.

When *Gilgamesh* was right way up the antigrav was bolted to one wall, about three feet above the floor. Now the lowest point is the place where this wall joins what used to be the floor. Something has fallen down to that point and is huddled there in the dark.

The beam jerks suddenly up and the breath whoops out of me; a round thing sticking out of the wall—then I realize it is an archaic space-helmet, clamped to the wall for safety when the wearer took it off.

I take charge of the ellipse of light and move it slowly down, past the fuse, to the thing below. A little dark scalloping of the edge of the light. The tips of fingers. A hand.

I turn up the light.

When the missile struck the big computer was wrenched loose

from the floor. It careened down as the floor tilted, taking with it anything that stood in its way.

M'Clare was just stooping to the fuse, I think. The computer smashed against his legs and pinned him down in the angle between the wall and the floor. His legs are hidden by it.

Because of the spacesuit he does not looked crushed; the thick clumsy joints have kept their roundness, so far as they are visible; only his hands and head are bare and vulnerable looking.

I am halfway down, floating on minimum gravity, before it really occurs to me that he may be still alive.

I switch to half and drop beside him. His face is colorless but he is breathing all right.

First-aid kit. I will never make fun of Space Force thoroughness again. Rows and rows of small plastic ampoules. Needles.

Pain-killer, first. I read the directions twice, sweating. Emergencies only—this is. One dose *only* to be given and if patient is not in good health use—never mind that. I fit on the longest needle and jab it through the suit, at the back of the thigh, as far towards the knee-joint as I can get because the suit is thinner. Half one side, half the other.

Now to get the computer off. At a guess it weighs about five hundred pounds. The beam-lever would do it but it would probably fall back.

Antigrav; the personal size is supposed to take up to three times the weight of the average man. I take mine off and buckle the straps through a convenient gap. I have my hands under the thing when M'Clare sighs again.

He is lying on his belly but his head is turned to one side, towards me. Slowly his eyelids open. He catches the sight of my hand; his head moves a little, and he says, "Lizzie. Golden Liz."

I say not to worry, we will soon be out of here.

His body jumps convulsively and he cries out. His hand reaches my sleeve and feels. He says, "Liz! Oh, God, I thought … what—"

I say things are under control and just keep quiet a bit.

His eyes close. After a moment he whispers, "Something hit the ship."

"A homing missile, I think."

I ought not to have said that; but it seems to make no particular impression, maybe he guessed as much.

I was wrong in wanting to shift the computer straight away, the release of pressure might start a hemorrhage; I dig out ampoules of blood-seal and inject them into the space between the suit and the flesh, as close to the damage as I can.

M'Clare asks how the ship is lying and I explain, also how I got here. I dig out the six-by-two-inch packet of expanding stretcher and read the directions. He is quiet for a minute or two, gathering strength; then he says sharply: "Lizzie. Stop that and listen.

"The fuse for the Andite is just under the antigrav. Go and find it. Go now. There's a dial with twenty divisions. Marked in black—you see it. Turn the pointer to the last division. Is that done?

"Now you see the switch under the pointer? Is your boat ready? I beg your pardon, of course you left it that way. Then turn the switch and get out."

I come back and see by my chrono that the blood-seal should be set; I get my hands under the computer. M'Clare bangs his hand on the floor.

"Lizzie, you little idiot, don't you realize that even if you get me out of this ship, which is next to impossible, you'll be delayed all the way—and if the Incognitans find either of us the whole plan's ruined? Much worse than ruined, once they see it's a hoax—"

I tell him I have two Andite sticks and they won't find us and on a night like this any story of explosions will be put down to sudden gusts or to lightning.

He is silent for a moment while I start lifting the computer, carefully; its effective weight with the antigrav full on is only about twenty pounds but is has all its inertia. Then he says quietly, "Please, Lizzie—can't you understand that the worst nightmare in the whole affair has been the fear that one of you might get injured? Or even killed? When I realized that only one person was needed to pilot*Gilgamesh*—it was the greatest relief I ever experienced. Now you say… ." His voice picks up suddenly. "Lizzie, you're beaten anyway. The … I'm losing all feeling. Even pain. I

can't feel anything behind my shoulders … it's creeping up—"

I say that means the pain-killer I shot him with is acting as advertised, and he makes a sound as much like an explosive chuckle as anything and it's quiet again.

The curvature between floor and wall is not helpful, I am trying to find a place to wedge the computer so it cannot fall back when I take off the antigrav. Presently I get it pushed on to a sort of ledge formed by a dent in the floor, which I think will hold it. I ease off the antigrav and the computer stays put, I don't like the looks of it so let's get out of here.

I push the packaged stretcher under his middle and pull the tape before I turn the light on to his legs to see the damage. I cannot make out very much; the joints of the suit are smashed some, but as far as I can see the inner lining is not broken which means it is still air-and-water-tight.

I put a hand under his chest to feel how the stretcher is going; it is now expanded to eighteen inches by six and I can feel it pushing out, but it is *slow*, what else have I to do—oh yes, get the helmet.

I am standing up to reach for it when M'Clare says, "What are you doing? Yes … well, don't put it on for a minute. There's something I would like to tell you, and with all respect for your obstinacy I doubt very much whether I shall have another chance. Keep that light off me, will you? It hurts my eyes.

"You know, Lizzie, I dislike risking the lives of any of the students for whom I am responsible, but as it happens I find the idea of you —blowing yourself to atoms particularly objectionable because … I happen to be in love with you. You're also one of my best students, I used to think that … was why I'd been so insistent on your coming to Russett, but I rather think … my motives were mixed even then. I meant to tell you this after you graduated, and to ask you to marry me, not that … I thought you would, I know quite well … you never quite forgave me, but I don't-want-to-have to remember … I didn't … have the guts to—"

His voice trails off, I get a belated rush of sense to the head and turn the light on his face. His head is turned sideways and his fist is clenched against the side of his neck. When I touch it his hand falls open and five discharged ampoules fall out.

Pain-killer.

Maximum dose, one ampoule.

All that talk was just to hold my attention while he fixed the needles and—

I left the kit spread out right next to him.

While I am taking this in some small cold corner of my mind is remembering the instructions that are on the pain-killer ampoule; it does not say, outright, that it is the last refuge for men in the extremity of pain and despair; therefore it cannot say, outright, that they sometimes despair too soon; but it does tell you the name of the antidote.

There are only three ampoules of this and they also say, maximum dose one ampoule. I try to work it out but lacking all other information the best I can do is inject two and keep one till later. I put that one in my pocket.

The stretcher is all expanded now; a very thin but quite rigid grid, six feet by two; I lash him on it without changing his position and fasten the helmet over his head.

Antigrav; the straps just go round him and the stretcher.

I point the thing up towards the trap door and give it a gentle push; then I scramble up the rungs and get there just in time to guide it through. It takes a knock then and some more while I am getting it down to the next partition, but he can't feel it.

This time I find the door, because the roar of noise behind it acts as a guide. The sea is getting up and is dashing halfway to the door as I crawl through. My boat is awash, pivoting to and fro on the grips of the front "limbs."

I grab it, release the limbs and pull it as far back as the door. I maneuver the stretcher on top and realize there is nothing to fasten it with … except the antigrav, I get that undone, holding the stretcher in balance, and manage to put it under the stretcher and pass the straps between the bars of the grid … then round the little boat, and the buckle just grips the last inch. It will hold, though.

I set the boat to face the broken end of the ship, but I daren't put it farther back than the doorway; I turn the antigrav to half, fasten the limb-grips and rush back towards the nose of the ship. Silver knob under the dial. I turn it down, hear the thing begin a fast,

steady ticking, and turn and run.

Twenty minutes.

One and a half to get back to the boat, four to get inside it without overturning. Nearly two to get down to the sea—balance difficult. One and a half to lower myself in.

Thirty seconds' tossing before I sink below the wave layer; then I turn the motor as high as I dare and head for the shore.

In a minute I have to turn it down; at this speed the radar is bothered by water currents and keeps steering me away from them as though they were rocks; I finally find the maximum safe speed but it is achingly slow. What happens if you are in water when Andite blows half a mile away? A moment's panic as I find the ship being forced up, then I realize I have reached the point where the beach starts to shelve, turn off radar and motor and start crawling. Eternal slow reach out, grab, shove, haul, with my heart in my mouth; then suddenly the nose breaks water and I am hauling myself out with a last wave doing its best to overbalance me.

I am halfway out of the boat when the Andite blows behind me. There is a flat slapping sound; then an instant roar of wind as the air receives the binding energies of several tons of matter; then a long wave comes pelting up the beach and snatches at the boat.

I huddle into the shingle and hold the boat; I have just got the antigrav turned off, otherwise I think it would have been carried away. There are two or three more big waves and a patter of spray; then it is over.

The outlet valve of the helmet is working, so M'Clare is still breathing; very deep, very slow.

I unfasten the belt of the antigrav, having turned it on again, and pull the belt through the buckle. No time to take it off and rearrange it; anyway it will work as well under the stretcher as on top of it. I drag the boat down to the water, put in an Andite cartridge with the longest fuse I have, set the controls to take it straight out to sea at maximum depth the radar control will allow—six feet above bottom—and push it off. The other Andite cartridge starts burning a hole in my pocket; I would have liked to put that in too, but I must keep it, in case.

I look at my chrono and see that in five minutes the hopper will come.

Five minutes.

I am halfway back to the stretcher when I hear a noise further up the beach. Unmistakable. Shingle under a booted foot.

I stand frozen in mid-stride. I turned the light out after launching the boat but my eyes have not recovered yet; it is murkily black. Even my white suit is only the faintest degree paler than my surroundings.

Silence for a couple of minutes. I stand still. But it can't have gone away. What happens when the hopper comes? They will see whoever it is on the infrared vision screen. They won't come—

Footsteps again. Several.

Then the clouds part and one of those superfluous little moons shines straight through the gap.

The bay is not like the stereo the colonel showed because that was taken in winter; now the snow is melted, leaving bare shingle and mud and a tumble of rocks; more desolate than the snow. Fifty feet off is a man.

He is huddled up in a mass of garments but his head is bare, rising out of a hood which he has pushed back, maybe so as to listen better; he looks young, hardly older than me. He is holding a long thin object which I never saw before, but it must be a weapon of some sort.

This is the end of it. All the evidence of faking is destroyed; except M'Clare and me. Even if I use the Andite he has seen me—and that leaves M'Clare.

I am standing here on one foot like a dancer in a jammed movie, waiting for Time to start again or the world to end—

Like the little figure in the dance-instruction kit Dad got when I was seven, when you switched her off in the middle.

Like a dancer—

My weight shifts on to the forward foot. My arms swing up, forwards, back. I take one step, another.

Swing. Turn. Kick. Sideways.

Like the silly little dancer who could not get out of the plastic block; but I am moving forward little by little, even if I have to take

three steps roundabout for every one in advance.

Arms, up. Turn, round. Leg, up. Straighten, out. Step.

Called the Dance of the Little Robot, for about three months Dad thought it was no end cute, till he caught on I was thinking so, too.

It is just about the only kind of dance you could do on shingle, I guess.

When this started I thought I might be going crazy, but I just had not had time to work it out. In terms of Psychology it goes like this; to shoot off a weapon a man needs a certain type of Stimulus like the sight of an enemy over the end of it. So if I do my best not to look like an enemy he will not get that Stimulus. Or put it another way most men think twice before shooting a girl in the middle of a dance. If I should happen to get away with this, nobody will believe his story, he won't believe it himself.

As for the chance of getting away with it, i.e., getting close enough to grab the gun or hit him with a rock or something, I know I would become a Stimulus to shooting before I did that but there are always the clouds, if one will only come back over the moon again.

I have covered half the distance.

Twenty feet from him, and he takes a quick step back.

Turn, kick, out, step. I am swinging round away from him, let's hope he finds it reassuring. I dare not look up but I think the light is dimming. Turn, kick, out, step. Boxing the compass. Coming round again.

And the cloud is coming over the moon, out of the corner of my eye I see darkness sweeping towards us—and I see his face of sheer horror as he sees it, too; he jumps back, swings up the weapon, and fires straight in my face.

And it is dark. So much for Psychology.

There is a clatter and other sounds—

Well, quite a lot for Psychology maybe, because at twenty feet he seems to have missed me.

I pick myself up and touch something which apparently is his weapon, gun or whatever. I leave it and hare back to the stretcher,

next-to fall over it but stop just in time, and switch on the antigrav. Up; level it; now where to? The cliffs enclosing the bay are about thirty yards off to my left and they offer the only cover.

The shingle is relatively level; I make good time till I stumble against a rock and nearly lose the stretcher. I step up on to the rock and see the cliff as a blacker mass in the general darkness, only a yard away. I edge the stretcher round it.

It is almost snatched out of my hand by a gust of wind. I pull it back and realize that in the bay I have been sheltered; there is pretty near half a gale blowing across the face of the cliff.

Voices and footsteps, away back among the rocks where the man came from.

If the clouds part again they will see me, sure as shooting.

I take a hard grip on the stretcher and scramble round the edge of the cliff.

After the first gust the wind is not so bad; for the most part it is trying to press me back into the cliff. The trouble is that I can't see. I have to shuffle my foot forward, rubbing one shoulder against the cliff to feel where it is because I have no hand free.

After a few yards I come to an impasse; something more than knee high; boulder, ridge, I can't tell.

I weigh on the edge of the stretcher and tilt it up to get it over the obstacle. With the antigrav full on it keeps its momentum and goes on moving up. I try to check it, but the wind gets underneath.

It is tugging to get away; I step blindly upwards in the effort to keep up with it. One foot goes on a narrow ledge, barely a toe hold. I am being hauled upwards. I bring the other foot up and find the top of a boulder, just within reach. Now the first foot—

And now I am on top of the boulder, but I have lost touch with the cliff and the full force of the wind is pulling the stretcher upwards. I get one arm over it and fumble underneath for the control of the antigrav; I must give it weight and put it down on this boulder and wait for the wind to drop.

Suddenly I realize that my weight is going; bending over the stretcher puts me in the field of the antigrav. A moment later another gust comes, and I realize I am rising into the air.

Gripping the edge of the stretcher with one hand I reach out the

other, trying to grasp some projection on the face of the cliff. Not being able to see I simply push farther away till it is out of reach.

We are still rising.

I pull myself up on the stretcher; there is just room for my toes on either side of M'Clare's legs. The wind roaring in my ears makes it difficult to think.

Rods of light slash down at me from the edge of the cliff. For a moment all I can do is duck; then I realize we are still well below them, but rising every moment. The cliff-face is about six feet away; the wind reflecting from it keeps us from being blown closer.

I must get the antigrav off. I let myself over the side of the stretcher, hanging by one hand, and fumble for the controls. I can just reach. Then I realize this is no use. Antigrav controls are not meant to go off with a click of the finger; they might get switched off accidentally. To work the switch and the safety you must have two hands, or one hand in the optimum position. My position is about as bad as it could be. I can stroke the switch with one finger; no more.

I haul myself back on to the stretcher and realize we are only about six feet under the beam of light. Only one thing left. I feel in my pocket for the Andite. Stupidly, I am still also bending over the outlet valve of the helmet, trying to see whether M'Clare is still breathing or not.

The little white cigar is not fused. I have to hold on with one hand. In the end I manage to stick the Andite between thumb and finger-roots of that hand while I use the other to find the fuse and stick it over the Andite. The shortest; three minutes.

I think the valve is still moving—

Then something drops round me; I am hauled tight against the stretcher; we are pulled strongly downwards with the wind buffeting and snatching, banged against the edge of something, and pulled through into silence and the dark.

For a moment I do not understand; then I recognize the feel of Fragile Cargo, still clamping me to the stretcher, and I open my mouth and scream and scream.

Clatter of feet. Hatch opens. Fragile Cargo goes limp.

I stagger to my feet. Faint light through the hatch; B's head. I

hold out the Andite stick and she turns and shouts; and a panel slides open in the wall so that the wind comes roaring in.

I push the stick through and the wind snatches it away and it is gone.

After that—

After that, for a while, nothing, I suppose, though I have no recollection of losing consciousness; only without any sense of break I find I am flat on my back on one of the seats in the cabin of the hopper.

I sit up and say "How—"

B who is sitting on the floor beside me says that when the broadcaster was activated of course they came at once, only while they were waiting for the boat to reach land whole squads of land cars arrived and started combing the area, and some came up on top of the cliff and shone their headlights out over the sea so Mr. Yardo had to lurk against the cliff face and wait till I got into a position where he could pick me up and it was *frightfully* clever of me to think of floating up on antigrav—

I forgot about the broadcaster.

I forgot about the hopper come to that, there seemed to be nothing in the world except me and the stretcher and the enemy.

Stretcher.

I say, "Is M'Clare—"

At which moment Mr. Yardo turns from the controls with a wide smile of triumph and says "Eighteen twenty-seven, girls!" and the world goes weightless and swings upside down.

Then still with no sense of any time-lapse I am lying in the big lighted hold, with the sound of trampling all round: it is somehow filtered and far off and despite the lights there seems to be a globe of darkness around my head. I hear my own voice repeating, "M'Clare? How's M'Clare?"

A voice says distantly, without emphasis, "M'Clare? He's dead."

The next time I come round it is dark. I am vaguely aware of having been unconscious for quite a while.

There is a single thread of knowledge connecting this moment

with the last: M'Clare's dead.

This is the central factor: I seem to have been debating it with myself for a very long time.

I suppose the truth is simply that the Universe never guarantees anything; life, or permanence, or that your best will be good enough.

The rule is that you have to pick yourself up and go on; and lying here in the dark is not doing it.

I turn on my side and see a cluster of self-luminous objects including a light switch. I reach for it.

How did I get into a hospital?

On second thoughts it is a cabin in the ship, or rather two of them with the partition torn out, I can see the ragged edge of it. There is a lot of paraphernalia around; I climb out to have a look.

Holy horrors what's happened? Someone borrowed my legs and put them back wrong; my eyes also are not functioning well, the light is set at Minimum and I am still dazzled. I see a door and make for it to get Explanations from somebody.

Arrived, I miss my footing and stumble against the door and on the other side someone says "Hello, Lizzie. Awake at last?"

I think my heart stops for a moment. I can't find the latch. I am vaguely aware of beating something with my fists, and then the door gives, sticks, gives again and I stumble through and land on all fours the other side of it.

Someone is calling: "Lizzie! Are you hurt? Where the devil have they all got to? Liz!"

I sit up and say, "They said you were *dead*!"

"*Who* did?"

"I … I … someone in the hold. I said How's M'Clare? and they said you were dead."

M'Clare frowns and says gently, "Come over here and sit down quietly for a bit. You've been dreaming."

Have I? Maybe the whole thing was a dream—but if so how far does it go? Going down in the heli? The missile? The boat? Crawling through the black tunnel of a broken ship?

No, because he is sitting in a sort of improvised chaise longue and

his legs are evidently strapped in place under the blanket; he is fumbling with the fastening or something.

I say "Hey! Cut that out!"

He straightens up irritably.

"Don't you start that, Lysistrata. I've been suffering the attentions of the damnedest collection of amateur nurses who ever handled a thermocouple, for over a week. I don't deny they've been very efficient, but when it comes to—"

Over a *week*?

He nods. "My dear Lizzie, we left Incognita ten days ago. Amateur nursing again! They have some unholy book of rules which says that for Exposure, Exhaustion and Shock the best therapy is sleep. I don't doubt it, but it goes on to say that in extreme cases the patient has been known to benefit by as much as two weeks of it. I didn't find out that they were trying it on you until about thirty-six hours ago when I began inquiring why you weren't around. They kept me under for three days—in fact until their infernal Handbook said it was time for my leg muscles to have some exercise. Miss Lammergaw was the ring-leader."

No wonder my legs feel as though someone exchanged the muscles for cotton wool, just wait till I get hold of Kirsty.

If it hadn't been for her, I shouldn't have spent ten days remembering, even in my sleep, that—

I say, "Hell's feathers, it was *you*!"

M'Clare makes motions as though to start getting out of his chair, looking seriously alarmed. I say, "It was your voice! When I asked —"

M'Clare, quite definitely, starts to blush. Not much, but some.

"Lizzie, I believe you're right. I have a sort of vague memory of someone asking how I was—and I gave what I took to be a truthful answer. I remember it seemed quite inconceivable that I could be alive. In fact I still don't understand it. Neither Yardo nor Miss Laydon could tell me. How *did* you get me out of that ship?"

Well, I do my best to explain, glossing over one or two points; at the finish he closes his eyes and says nothing for a while.

Then he says, "So except for this one man who saw you, you left no traces at all?"

Not that I know of, but—

"Do you know, five minutes later there were at least twenty men in that bay, most of them scientists? They don't seem to have found anything suspicious. Visibility was bad, of course, and you can't leave foot-prints in shingle—"

Hold on, what *is* all this?

M'Clare says, "We've had two couriers while you were asleep. Yes, I know it's not ordinarily possible for a ship on Mass-Time to get news. One of these days someone will have an interesting problem in Cultural Engineering, working out how to integrate some of these Space Force secrets into our economic and social structure without upsetting the whole of the known volume. Though courier boats make their crews so infernally sick I doubt whether the present type will ever come into common use. Anyway, we've had transcripts of a good many broadcasts from Incognita, the last dated four days ago; and as far as we can tell they're interpreting *Gilgamesh* just as we meant them to.

"The missile, by the way, was experimental, waiting to be test-fired the next day. The man in charge saw *Gilgamesh* on the alarm screens and got trigger-happy. The newscasters were divided as to whether he should be blamed or praised; they all seem to feel he averted a menace, at least temporarily, but some of them think the invaders could have been captured alive.

"The first people on the scene came from a scientific camp; you and Miss Laydon saw their lights on the way down. You remember that area is geophysically interesting? Well, by extraordinary good luck an international group was there studying it. They rushed straight off to the site of the landing—they actually saw *Gilgamesh*, and she registered on some of their astronomical instruments, too. They must be a reckless lot. What's more, they started trying to locate her on the sea bottom the next day. Found both pieces; they're still trying to locate the nose. They were all set to try raising the smaller piece when their governments both announced in some haste that they were sending a properly equipped expedition. Jointly.

"There's been no mention in any newscast of anyone seeing fairies

or sea maidens—I expect the poor devil thinks you were a hallucination."

So we brought it off.

I am very thankful in a distant sort of way, but right now the Incognitans have no more reality for me than the Lost Kafoozalum.

M'Clare came through alive.

I could spend a good deal of time just getting used to that fact, but there is something I ought to say and I don't know how.

I inquire after his injuries and learn they are healing nicely.

I look at him and he is frowning.

He says, "Lizzie. Just before my well-meant but ineffective attempt at suicide—"

Here it comes.

I say quick If he is worrying about all that nonsense he talked in order to distract my attention, forget it; I have.

Silence, then he says wearily, "I talked nonsense, did I?"

I say there is no need to worry, under the circumstances anyone would have a perfect right to be raving off his Nut.

I then find I cannot bear this conversation any longer so I get up saying I expect he is tired and I will call someone.

I get nearly to the door when

"*No*, Lizzie! you can't let that crew loose on me just in order to change the conversation. Come back here. I appreciate your wish to spare my feelings, but it's wasted. We'll have this out here and now.

"I remember quite well what I said, and so do you: I said that I loved you. I also said that I had intended to ask you to marry me as soon as you ceased to be one of my pupils. Well, the results of Finals were officially announced three days ago.

"Oh, I suppose I always knew what the answer would be, but I didn't want to spend the rest of my life wondering, because I never had the guts to ask you.

"You don't dislike me as you used to—you've forgiven me for making you come to Russett—but you still think I'm a cold-blooded manipulator of other people's minds and emotions. So I am; it's part

of the job.

"You're quite right to distrust me for that, though. It is the danger of this profession, that we end up by looking on everybody and everything as a subject for manipulation. Even in our personal lives. I always knew that: I didn't begin to be afraid of it until I realized I was in love with you.

"I could have made you love me, Lizzie. I could! I didn't try. Not that I didn't want love on those terms, or any terms. But to use professional … tricks … in private life, ends by destroying all reality. I always treated you exactly as I treated my other students —I think. But I could have made you think you loved me … even if I am twice your age—"

This I cannot let pass, I say "Hi! According to College rumor you cannot be more than thirty-six; I'm twenty-three."

M'Clare says in a bemused sort of way He will be thirty-seven in a couple of months.

I say, "I will be twenty-four next week and your arithmetic is still screwy; and here is another datum you got wrong. I do love you. Very much."

He says, "Golden Liz."

Then other things which I remember all right, I shall keep them to remember any time I am tired, sick, cold, hungry Hundred-and-ninety—; but they are not for writing down.

Then I suppose at some point we agreed it is time for me to go, because I find myself outside the cabin and there is Colonel Delano-Smith.

He makes me a small speech about various matters ending that he hears he has to congratulate me.

Huh?

Oh, Space and Time did one of those unimitigated so-and-sos, my dear classmates, leave M'Clare's communicator on?

The colonel says he heard I did very well in my Examinations.

Sweet splitting photons I forgot all about Finals.

It is just as well my Education has come to an honorable end, because … well, shades of … well, Goodness gracious and likewise Dear me, I am going to marry a *Professor*.

Better just stick to it I am going to marry M'Clare, it makes better sense that way.

But Gosh we are going to have to do some re-adjusting to a changed Environment. Both of us.

Oh, well, M'Clare is a Professor of Cultural Engineering and I just past my Final Exams in same; surely if anyone can we should be able to work out how you live Happily Ever After?


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